



## The 107 female authors everyone should have on their bookshelf

POSTED BY FRANCESCA BROWN FOR BOOKS

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*Meet some of the world's greatest female authors, essayists and beyond.*

word after a word after a word is power." Margaret Atwood

"A

Search "women writers" on Wikipedia and before the 19th century (when Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft turn up among others), you'll find a grand total of four entries spanning 2,000 years.

Suppressed, oppressed and sidelined, it's taken centuries for women to get their written voice heard but now... not so much.

From breakout names (Sally Rooney and Angie Thomas), incredible contemporary writers (Bernardine Evaristo, Celeste Ng and Jennifer Egan) to the literary powerhouses dominating modern writing (Margaret Atwood and Hilary Mantel) and much-missed greats (Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou), female writing has defined the 20th and 21st centuries so far.

We've asked authors, publishers, book lovers and beyond to nominate their favourite women writers alongside our own tributes. While by no means a definitive list (let us know who you think should also be included), here are some of the brilliant women authors, poets, playwrights and essayists everyone should have on their bookshelves.

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#### GREATEST FEMALE AUTHORS EVER: THE PIONEERS

##### 107. APHRA BEHN (1640-1689)

Meet the woman who helped create fiction: Behn is considered England's first-ever professional female writer thanks to her plays (featuring the then-mistress of the king, Nell Gwynne) and the novel *Oroonoko* (1688) – an astonishing book that is unflinching in its portrayal of slavery, violence and honour.

##### 106. CHARLOTTE BRONTË (1816-1855) BY AUTHOR SHARON BOLTON

"Don't be fooled by the parsonages and the prim bonnets; this bitch's novels throb with sex. Throughout the Cinderella-creepiness of *Jane Eyre* (1847), the subversive isolation of *Villette* (1853) or the feminist polemic that is *Shirley* (1849), the frustrated howling of the author rings in our ears. Brontë was a woman born too soon, constrained by her upbringing and whose only outlet for her passion and fierce intelligence was her pen. Charlotte Brontë remains the undisputed queen of the romantic thriller."

*The Split* by Sharon Bolton (£12.99, Orion) is out 28 May 2020

##### 105. NELLA LARSEN (1891-1964)

"She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her." The daughter of a white Danish mother and a black West Indian father, Chicago-born Larsen's two novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), cemented her position as part of the Harlem Renaissance. Feted by her contemporaries, both her books pioneered the exploration of race identity and identification in America and are astonishing in their prescience.

##### 104. FANNY BURNEY (1752-1840)

AKA the woman who influenced Jane Austen (a line from her 1782 novel *Cecilia* even inspired the title for that little-known work *Pride And Prejudice*)... Creating 'scribblings' from the age of 10, Burney wrote novels, plays, journals, letters and one biography, making a name for herself as a satirist of the aristocracy. Her most enduring work, *Evelina* (1778), is both a guide to 18th century society and a subversion of it.

##### 103. CARSON MCCULLERS (1917-1967)

"The heart is a lonely hunter with only one desire! To find some lasting comfort in the arms of another's fire..." Read Georgia-born McCullers at the right age and you'll end up naming firstborns after her. With a natural-born ability to conjure up childhood alienation, oddbods, loners and small-town frustration, her 1940 novel *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter* remains an American classic with the capacity to collapse your heart. (She wrote it aged just 23.)

##### 102. DAPHNE DU MAURIER (1907-1989)

If ever you need the very definition of a page-turner, it's *Rebecca* (1938). While the anonymous narrator may put the wet in blanket, she's entertainingly tormented by the most dastardly twosome in modern fiction: Mrs Danvers, the creepy housekeeper, and Maxim de Winter, the world's most self-absorbed husband. We're on Rebecca's side... Put that together with some of the world's most elegant and creepy short stories (*The Birds* (1963) and 1973's *Don't Look Now*) and her other books which include *Jamaica Inn* (1936) and *My Cousin Rachel* (1951) and there's no arguing that Du Maurier is one of literature's finest names.



Writer Daphne Du Maurier in 1947: the mind behind one of the world's greatest thrillers, *Rebecca*

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#### 7 feel-good books by female authors to devour in one sitting

#### 101. ELIZABETH GASKELL (1810-1865)

That's Mrs Gaskell to you... The author of *Cranford* (1851-53), *North And South* (1855) and *Wives And Daughters* (1865), Gaskell counted Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë among her friends and admirers (she wrote the latter's biography – *The Life Of Charlotte Brontë* – in 1857). But, despite her comfortable background and connections, she was unafraid of tackling the plight of the working classes – which made her less than popular with Victorian critics.

#### 100. EMILY BRONTË (1818-1848) BY AUTHOR AND WOMEN'S PRIZE FOR FICTION CO-FOUNDER, KATE MOSSE

"It's not a question of having a 'favourite' novelist, but rather about someone having written a book that means more than any other. That novel, for me, is Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. It's a story of violence and obsession; it's a ghost story; or it's a celebration of the timelessness of the land and the power of nature; or it's an attack on the Victorian hypocrisies of race, sex, marriage and class. Brontë proved that what matters in a writer is imagination, not personal experience – that it's the ability to tell a story, to create imagined worlds, that makes a writer – for all this passion came from the pen of a solitary young woman who rarely left her home in Haworth, Yorkshire. Her literary legacy is astonishing."

*The Burning Chambers* by Kate Mosse (£5.99, Pan) is out now

#### 99. SARAH ORNE JEWETT (1849-1909) BY AUTHOR SARAH MOSS

"I like Sarah Orne Jewett's work partly for her sense of place, the Maine coast that I know only from books. Despite the late-19th century fashion for wistful romanticism, Jewett insists on the complexity of remote and beautiful areas, reminding her readers that the sea can lead to dark places and that small communities are often but not invariably kind to their members. The narrator of *The Country Of The Pointed Firs* (1896) is a single woman in early middle age but unlike most fictional spinsters of the period, she's clever and gently cynical. I admire the confidence of the novel's loose form, where one chapter builds on another without the obvious architecture of a plot and the subtlety of characterisation and especially dialogue."

*Summerwater* by Sarah Moss (£14.99, Picador) is out 20 August 2020

#### 98. MARY SHELLEY (1797-1851)

"Hey Mary, what did you do last night?"

"Oh, it was tipping it down so I just stayed in and invented science fiction..."

As any former teen goth can tell you, *Frankenstein* (1818) was born after a stormy night on holiday in Geneva as Mary Shelley (daughter of pioneering feminist and equally ground-breaking writer Mary Wollstonecraft, natch); her husband, the Romantic poet Percy Shelley, and his dissipated friend, Lord Byron, each tried to come up with a horror story. Consequently, Shelley produced one of the most enduring and inspiring works in fiction – a novel filled with monstrous imagery, self-hatred and motifs of motherhood that launched a genre.

#### 97. GEORGE ELIOT (1819-1880) BY COMEDIAN AND AUTHOR MARK WATSON

"George Eliot's real name was Mary, but she had to adopt a male nom de plume to be taken seriously: for that ignominy alone she deserves her place in the pantheon of inspirational female writers. Luckily the novels themselves serve as a more substantial legacy – especially *Middlemarch* (1871). If you only read one 'book you



thought you'd never quite get round to' this year, make it that one."

*The Place That Didn't Exist* by Mark Watson (£7.99, Picador) is out now

#### 96. MARIAMA BÂ (1929-1981)

A self-proclaimed feminist and "modern Muslim woman", Senegalese Bâ was a natural writer. Her first novel, 1980's *So Long A Letter*, takes the form of one long letter written by a woman sharing the mourning of her husband with a younger wife. In it, she rails against the inequities of polygamy and its oppression of African women, weaving together insights into a life that reflected the author's own. Tragically, Bâ died from a protracted illness before the publication of her second book, *Scarlet Song* (1986).

#### 95. VIRGINIA WOOLF (1882-1941) BY AUTHOR NAOMI WOOD

"I think Woolf is one of my favourite writers not because of where she takes me in terms of her stories, but where she takes me with her language. We only vaguely care whether the Ramsays will get to the lighthouse, or what Clarissa Dalloway's dinner party will feed her guests, or Orlando's fate as a woman... Rather, it is the richness of Woolf's language that always holds me rapt: the perfect images of light, glass, water; the attention to the rushing and falling of the minute and the hour; the shadow of death that makes all her characters edged in some heavenly light; if only briefly. (Such skill! Such an eye! Such a steady hand!) with great joy."

*The Hiding Game* by Naomi Wood (£14.99, Picador) is out now

#### 94. ZORA NEALE HURSTON (1891-1960) BY SHARMAINE LOVEGROVE, PUBLISHER, DIALOGUE BOOKS

"Zora Neale Hurston was the embodiment of the Harlem Renaissance. She was bold in her assertions, candid about her politics and the devastating effects of racism and segregation and celebratory about her Blackness. Her writing is crucial to understanding the plight of African-American women and she writes with illuminating verve and feels as vital to read now as it did then in 1930s America. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is a book that should be in every home, it shines a spotlight on the human condition and the transformation from childhood to adulthood from rags to riches."



The extraordinary Zora Neale Hurston at a book fair in New York, 1937

#### YOU MAY ALSO LIKE

#### The black women writers you should have on your radar

#### 93. NANCY MITFORD (1904-1973)

Three novels by Nancy Mitford you need to read:

- 1) *The Pursuit Of Love* (1945) – Love, family, abandoned marriages, bonkers aristos, tragedy, an airing cupboard and the Spanish Civil War. All you need for Sunday afternoon right there.
- 2) *The Blessing* (1951) – An Anglo-Franco marriage hits the rocks thanks to a Machiavellian child.



5) *Christmas Pudding* (1932) – Save this tale of a classic country house in the Cotswolds for December and revel in the funny, satirical and easy charm of Mitford's Bright Young Things.

## 92. AUDRE LORDE (1934-1992)

It was only in 2017 that a British publisher united all of Lorde's poetry, speeches and essays in one volume for the UK; an incredible fact given Lorde's influence over everything from intersectional feminism to gay rights during her lifetime. A self-described "black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet", Lorde's work was always about the unflinching truth of who she was and the world around her. As writer Jackie Kay wrote in *The Guardian* in 2008: "Audre Lorde believed in naming the names. She wrote with groundbreaking eloquence about the complexities of identity, and was convinced that silence is the greatest enemy." She also gave the pregnant Kay her royalty cheque for an interview in *Spare Rib* magazine (who cheekily asked if she'd like to donate it back to their cause) telling her to open an account for her baby instead.

## 91. AGATHA CHRISTIE (1890-1976)

Selling just the 2 billion copies, Christie remains the world's bestselling novelist. Best known for Miss Marple, Hercule Poirot, long-running stage adaptation *The Mousetrap* and going AWOL for 10 days only to be found in a Harrogate spa (see Vanessa Redgrave and Dustin Hoffmann in 1979 film *Agatha* for further reference), Christie's books remain rollicking, tightly plotted whodunnits.

## 90. ANAÏS NIN (1903-1977)

Pornographer, feminist, liberator, monster, genius – French writer Anaïs Nin has weathered it all. Roundly mocked by the lit set in her lifetime for having the temerity to write erotica and later tackle abortion and incest in both her memoirs and novels (while her male counterparts Henry Miller and Gore Vidal were showered with adulation), she's thankfully since become one of fiction's must-read icons. Start with 1977's ground-breaking *Delta Of Venus*.

## 89. COLETTE (1873-1954)

Next time you're in Paris take a petit stroll to 9 rue de Beaujolais and seek out the marble plaque bearing the words "Here lived, here died Colette, whose work is a window wide open on life." From her early works – the sensual *Claudine* series (1900-1903), *The Vagabond* (1910) and *Chéri* (1920) – to her 1944 novel *Gigi*, Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette turned her whatever-is-sharper-than-a-razor gaze to the follies of love, sex and life.

## 88. EDITH WHARTON (1862-1937)

Wharton's novels should come with a health warning. Love, idealism and hope are brutally trampled under Wharton's piercing take on the New York upper class society of the late 19th century. But oh, what a ride: *The House Of Mirth* (1905) (poor Lily Bart...), the novella *Ethan Frome* (1911) and *The Age Of Innocence* (1920) are lacerating in their poignancy. Literally, read them and weep.

## 87. WILLA CATHER (1873-1947) BY AUTHOR TAHMIMA ANAM

"When I was 15, my high-school English teacher, Mr Bucknell, assigned us to read *My Ántonia* (1918). Cather's novel, set in the plains of Nebraska, is about an immigrant family and their spirited daughter, Ántonia. I was a miserable teenager looking to escape my own hometown and the wide-open spaces of Ántonia's homestead radically altered my sense of place in the world. Cather writes passionately about migration, homesickness and love, her stories woven indelibly into the landscape of the prairie. The images have remained in my mind, but more importantly, the story of a family trying to make their way in unfamiliar terrain has been a recurring theme in my imagination, and in my fiction, ever since."

*The Bones Of Grace* by Tahmima Anam is out now (£8.99, Canongate)

## 86. GEORGETTE HEYER (1902-1974) BY AUTHOR KATIE FFORDE

"Heyer has written novels (from Regency romances including *Regency Buck* (1935) to historical novels and thrillers such as *Footsteps In The Dark* (1932)) that have entertained a huge range of readers for nearly 100 years. From pre-teens to elderly army generals, male and female, we have all become addicted to her books. Her writing is superb; her style elegant. Her female characters are strong and resourceful and her men not only have a certain amount of self-knowledge but they allow themselves to be challenged by the strong women they fall in love with. She's also extremely funny."

*A Rose Petal Summer* by Katie Fforde is out now (£8.99, Century)

## 85. MOLLIE PANTER-DOWNES (1906-1997) BY LYDIA FELLGETT, MANAGER, PERSEPHONE BOOKS

"Mollie Panter-Downes is one of the most unjustly neglected writers of the 20th century. She published her first novel, *The Shoreless Sea* (1923), when she was 17 – it was a bestseller. She wrote three more popular novels as well as articles and short stories and, in 1929, married Clare Robinson, travelled round the world and moved to the 16th-century house near Chiddingfold in Surrey where she and her family lived for over sixty years. In 1947, she published *One Fine Day*, one of the century's most enduring novels. *The Independent* wrote that her writing is 'as profound as Katherine Mansfield, restrained as Jane Austen, sharp as Dorothy Parker.'"

**84. HARPER LEE (1926-2016)**

Until 2015, Lee's reputation was unimpeachable. Author of 1960's *To Kill A Mockingbird* (cited as second only to the Bible in terms of "making a difference"), creator of Atticus Finch and self-proclaimed one-hit wonder, Lee lived and wrote on her own terms shunning the spotlight. Then, a first draft of *Mockingbird* was 'uncovered' and 2015's *Go Set A Watchman* was released amid a swirl of acrimony about Lee's health and the discovery Atticus was a separatist. Deserving of a more fitting epitaph, embrace *Mockingbird*, read the recently released *Furious Hours: Murder, Fraud And The Last Trial Of Harper Lee* about Lee's last investigative story and remember Lee as she lived: fiercely.

**YOU MAY ALSO LIKE**

**The greatest Pulitzer Prize-winning books written by women**

1962: writer Harper Lee on the set of *To Kill A Mockingbird* with actor Gregory Peck

**83. TANA FRENCH (BORN 1973) BY AUTHOR CAROLINE CORCORAN**

"Summer 2015 was my summer of Tana. One of those special moments as a book lover when you finish one read (*The Secret Place*: they got me with comparisons to *The Secret History*) bereft only to discover that everything the author has ever written is that good. You're even more bereft once you complete the back catalogue, obviously, but it's fun while it lasts. Most of French's novels centre around the Dublin Murder Squad but the smartness of her plots mean it doesn't matter if you're not into crime. These books far transcend their genre. Her characters are excellent (often minor ones from past novels turn up again to take the lead) and her writing is some of the most beautiful I've ever discovered. I miss the summer of 2015."

*Through The Wall* by Caroline Corcoran (£7.99, Avon) is out now

**82. HANYA YANAGIHARA (BORN 1975)**

Meeting the softly self-possessed Yanagihara can be a shock to the system if you've read 2015's most talked-about book, *A Little Life*. Unwavering in its exploration of abuse, neglect and violence alongside love, loyalty and tenderness, the book provokes a visceral response in readers and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and Women's Prize For Fiction. Both *A Little Life* and her debut 2013 novel, *The People In The Trees*, mark Yanagihara as one of the most exciting and challenging authors working today.

**81. JENNY DISKI (1947-2016) BY AUTHOR JENN ASHWORTH**

"Jenny Diski is perhaps better known as a non-fiction writer and essayist, but I first discovered her through her novels. From the risky and gripping *Nothing Natural* (1986) that launched her career in the late 80s to the unsettlingly odd *Like Mother* (1988) – narrated by a brainless baby – Diski's work is characterised by a luminous intelligence, a compulsion to tackle difficult subjects and an irreverent wit. Readers of her later non-fiction essays, particularly those contained in *In Gratitude* (2016), her last, moving, remarkable book about her final

illness and relationship with Doris Lessing – are missing a trick if they don't also turn to her fiction.”  
*Notes Made By Falling* by Jenn Ashworth (£20, Goldsmiths) is out now

#### **80. HELEN OYEYEMI (BORN 1984) BY SANDRA TAYLOR, HEAD OF COMMUNICATIONS, WATERSTONES**

“Helen Oyeyemi is one of the most exciting novelists writing today. The worlds that she creates on her pages are always bold with imagination and never predictable. From literary fame at 18 years old with her debut *The Icarus Girl* (2006) to *What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours* (2017), reading Helen Oyeyemi is quite unlike anything else – she is mischievous, funny and dazzlingly playful. And yet her books are, in many ways, weighty – she is always saying so much and you can't help but want to read more!”

#### **79. MAGGIE O'FARRELL (BORN 1972) BY AUTHOR KATE HAMER**

“For anyone who has yet to read Maggie O'Farrell there are huge treats awaiting; books that add up to such a rich and compelling body of work it leaves one awestruck. It was her clean, beautiful prose that first drew me to Maggie's books but I stayed to read them all for much more than that. She captures deep, complex family relationships in a way that no one else quite matches. That other thing too – love – so hard to write about deftly. Yes, that's why I choose Maggie O'Farrell, she can write about love.”

*Crushed* by Kate Hamer (£8, Faber) is out now

#### **78. NAWAL EL SAADAWI (BORN 1931) BY STYLIST CONTRIBUTOR SARAH SHAFFI**

“Nawal El Saadawi is the most famous feminist writer you've probably never heard of, because her work mainly concerns Arab women. The Egyptian doctor and militant has written both fiction and non-fiction, covering the politics of sex, the patriarchy and the Arab world. My introduction to her was through *Woman At Point Zero* (1975), a novel about a woman in prison. *Woman At Point Zero* is told from the point of view of Firdaus, born to a peasant family and eventually finding herself rebelling against society. Written in the 1970s, its intimate look at how brutally society can treat women is still relevant today. El Saadawi is a writer that all women concerned with feminism should read.”

#### **YOU MAY ALSO LIKE**

**The most empowering feminist books: 35 women pick their favourite reads**



Portrait of Nawal el Saadawi in her home in 2015

#### **GREATEST FEMALE AUTHORS EVER: THE INSPIRATIONS**

#### **77. ALICE WALKER (BORN 1944)**

If Pratibha Parmar's documentary *Alice Walker: Beauty In Truth* ever turns up on Netflix may we suggest you add it to your watchlist? Revealing the activism of Walker and the writing and political power behind her books – most famously the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and National Book Award-winning book, *The Color Purple* (1982). While the novel has since had the Spielberg-and-stage-musical treatment, it remains astonishing in its power to shock and move after nearly 40 years. It's a cliché: but it will stay with you long after the final page.

#### **76. SHIRLEY JACKSON (1916-1965) BY STYLIST CONTRIBUTOR ANNA FIELDING**



"Shirley Jackson is a very dark writer, but also shockingly domestic. Her mid-century gothic dramas play out in small towns, convenience stores and houses with cellars full of preserves. *The Lottery* (published in the *New Yorker* in 1948) has a grim life-or-death ballot drawn by a man in blue jeans. *We Have Always Lived In The Castle* (1962) pulls you into the obsessions of the largely housebound teenage narrator, just as you start to doubt her sanity. Stephen King called Jackson's *The Haunting Of Hill House* (1959) one of the finest horror novels of the 20th century. Read with the lights on."

#### **75. MARILYNNE ROBINSON (BORN 1943) BY AMY ADAMS, PRODUCTION EDITOR, STYLIST**

"It's rare an author writes sentences so profound I feel moved to jot them down, but Marilynne Robinson has a gift for plumbing the depths of human emotion in a few deceptively simple words. Her three-part *Gilead* series, exploring faith, love and friendship in sleepy, small-town Iowa, consists of the Pulitzer prize-winning *Gilead* (2004), the Orange Prize-winning *Home* (2008) and *Lila* (2014), winner of the National Book Critics Circle award. Each can be read independently but treat yourself by settling down to all three."

#### **74. ALI SMITH (BORN 1962) BY ALISON BARROW, DIRECTOR OF MEDIA RELATIONS, TRANSWORLD**

"Ali Smith is a generous writer, unfailingly offering something new and dazzling with each story she delivers. These are stories of real people, in unreal circumstances. They beckon us in, take us into rooms of revelations and surprises and then, just as we are beginning to find our feet, surprise us again with a new door into a new room of revelations and surprises. Smith is an artist of subversion, her stories laced with humour yet rooted in deep humanity. The experience of reading an Ali Smith book tilts the head a notch at a time. In a world full of similar voices, she is deliciously and refreshingly, unique."

#### **73. ELIZABETH STROUT (BORN 1956) BY AUTHOR AND SCREENWRITER LISA OWENS**

"My favourite kind of fiction finds universal truth and resonance in the particularity of day-to-day experience and Elizabeth Strout is a master of this approach. Her characters are so flawed, funny, idiosyncratic – so gloriously real – that I feel I know them as intimately and deeply as my own family."

*Days Of The Bagnold Summer is out 8 June 2020*

#### **72. JHUMPA LAHIRI (BORN 1967)**

Of course, if we were to write a debut book of short stories, it would be to win the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. In crazy world. But that's exactly what Lahiri achieved with her 1999 collection, *Interpreter Of Maladies*. With *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), *The Lowland* (2013) and 2016's non-fiction *In Other Words* adding to her reputation – Lahiri is a writer of pure precision and craft.

Jhumpa Lahiri poses with her book *The Lowland* in 2013

#### **YOU MAY ALSO LIKE**

**Dystopian novels: 19 powerful and frightening books that every woman should read**

#### **71. JEANETTE WINTERSON (BORN 1959)**

"Like most people I lived for a long time with my mother and father. My father liked to watch the wrestling, my mother liked to wrestle; it didn't matter what. She was in the white corner and that was that." Thus began Winterson's joyous writing career in 1985 with her autobiographical novel, *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*. Telling the tale of her upbringing in a pentecostal evangelical home before she came out at the age of 16, it won her the Whitbread first novel award. Since then she's dabbled in everything from Napoleonic-era fairy tales (*The Passion*, 1987) to rewriting *The Winter's Tale* as part of the Hogarth Shakespeare series (*The Gap Of Time*, 2015) while *Frankissstein: A Love Story* tackles AI, sex dolls and Brexit. Quite simply, she's a national treasure.

#### 70. KIT DE WAAL (BORN 1960)

Don't expect to read a Kit De Waal book then wander off unchanged by the experience. Whether it's Maureen feeding up Leon with bacon sandwiches as he wonders about his little brother's fate in 2016's *My Name Is Leon* or Mona helping bereaved mothers through their grief in *The Trick To Time* (2018), these little glimpses of humanity will catch up with you at the most unexpected moments and leave you gulping down a lump in your throat. Combine that with De Waal's fiery energy in giving little-heard writers a voice (she's set up a writing scholarship for new authors and edited a book of working-class writing, *Common People*, for Unbound) and she's indisputably one of the most vital British writers working today.

#### 69. DONNA TARTT (BORN 1963) BY AUTHOR ROSA HOSKINS

"I read *The Secret History* (1992) by Donna Tartt when I was studying drama at university. I lived in a house with three other girls and we became obsessed with Tartt's debut novel. We all read it within a month and would talk about the book long into the night, not quite working ourselves into a Bacchanalian frenzy but definitely passionate about it. I read *The Little Friend* (2002) and *The Goldfinch* (2013) and enjoyed both. But, for me, nothing can touch *The Secret History*. When I first started writing, I struggled to find my voice and so I revisited the books that formed my literary tastes. On re-reading *The Secret History*, I studied Donna Tartt's strict, well-crafted sentences; each word is chosen with pinpoint precision. I'll never match the great Donna Tartt, but *The Secret History* has taught me about the craft of writing."

*It's All Going Wonderfully Well* by Rosa Hoskins is out now (£8.99, Arrow)

#### 68. PD JAMES (1920-2014) BY AUTHOR PETINA GAPPAN

"I discovered PD James many years after she started writing – about 40 years, in fact. The first book of hers I read was *Devices And Desires* (1989). I immediately became hooked. I went to my local bookshop, Payot in Geneva, and bought the entire Adam Dalgliesh backlist. I could not believe that I had missed her all this time.

I also discovered her Cordelia Gray series and her one-off novels, including *The Children Of Men* (1992), which in my view ranks as one of the finest examples of dystopian fiction. As I read more, I mean, all of her work, she quickly became one of my favourite authors and when I eventually grasped the courage to write myself, she became an unknowing teacher. I love the clean unfussiness of her style and the music in her uncluttered sentences. I love how beautifully she evokes a sense of place and I love her deep empathy for her characters. Most of all, I love her integrity – an unusual word to use of a writer, but I use it because PD James never pretended to be anything other than what she was: a well-educated middle-class English woman of a certain age and values. Her Anglican faith shines beautifully in her frequent references to the *Book Of Common Prayer*, a work imbued with unshowy, pared-down loveliness.

In 2007, I attended my first writing workshop in Kenya, organised by the Caine prize. Without knowing anything at all about me, Nick Elam, who was the prize administrator, said to me: 'Your work reminds me very much of PD James, in the way you mix consistency with surprise.' It is still the highest, if the most exaggerated, compliment that anybody has ever given me. I am very grateful to have read, and to have been influenced by, PD James."

*Out Of Darkness, Shining Lights* by Petina Gappan is out now (£16.99, Faber)

#### 67. ISABEL ALLENDE (BORN 1942)

To read Allende's 1982 book *The House Of Spirits* is to fall for three separate things: Bianca, the heroine who never backs down on love despite what life throws at her; magical realism (feel your mind judder) and Allende's writing, which is swooping, glorious and lyrical. Her most recent three novels – *Maya's Notebook* (2011), *Ripper* (2014) and *The Japanese Lover* (2015) are equally as transporting.

#### 66. ZADIE SMITH (BORN 1975)

From the epic, funny *White Teeth* (2000) to the brilliant short stories in *Grand Union* (2019), Smith is a writer that defines 21st century British fiction with a boundless talent. She mixes humour, intelligence, elegance and energy into all her writing – making the reader feel as graceful with words as she is. If only...

Author, teacher and essayist Zadie Smith

#### **65. MARIAN KEYES (BORN 1963) BY SAM EADES, PUBLISHING DIRECTOR, TRAPEZE**

"For over 20 years, Marian Keyes has dominated the bestseller lists, writing popular fiction that features modern women and their complex lives. Part of Keyes' mass appeal is her ability to tackle serious issues such as alcoholism and marital strife while still being able to make the reader laugh. I first fell in love with Marian as a teenager, and recommend new readers start at the beginning with *Watermelon* (1995). Keyes' debut stars Claire Walsh, a 28-year-old woman whose husband leaves her for someone else on the day their daughter is born. What happens when he decides to re-enter her life? Part love-story, *Watermelon* also introduces the reader to the noisy chaos that is the Walsh family. This big-hearted Irish family are much loved by readers and feature in five of her novels."

#### **64. JOYCE CAROL OATES (BORN 1938)**

It's hard to know where to start with Oates – prolific doesn't even begin to cover it. She currently has 59 published novels under her belt with another one due out later this year (*Night, Sleep, Death, The Stars* is due in June). But if we were to recommend one book to start with, it would be 1996's *We Were The Mulvaney's* – a compelling portrait of a golden family torn apart by their own inability to accept a tragic truth. Or maybe it would be 2000's *Blonde* – a doorstopping fictional take on the life of an actress eerily similar to Marilyn Monroe. Or maybe... Oh, we'll let you choose for yourselves.

#### **63. KATE ATKINSON (BORN 1951) BY AUTHOR PAULA HAWKINS**

"Kate Atkinson is one of Britain's finest novelists, penning books that are at once experimental and challenging, yet immensely readable. Her intricately woven, often dizzying plots are peopled with beautifully realised characters; she has a rare talent for moving the reader from laughter to tears within the space of a page. Atkinson writes about tragedies on the grand scale – whole cities devastated by war – and on the smaller, domestic, no less heartbreaking front; and she does so with wit, humanity and wisdom."

*Into The Water by Paula Hawkins (£5.99, BlackSwan) is out now*

#### **62. ELENA FERRANTE (BORN 1943) BY AUTHOR CATHERINE BANNER**

"I know I'm not the first to recommend Elena Ferrante; *My Brilliant Friend* (2011) and the Neapolitan series has sold 10 million. But in my view, that's still about 50 million too few. This woman has so much to say about Italy, the 20th century, poverty and aspiration, friendship, rivalry, ambition and what it's like to be a woman, a writer and a human being. And yet she says it with such subtlety and grace that for the first few hundred pages you believe you are merely being entertained. Like all great writers, she shows you the world as you didn't know you knew it. You won't regret reading her."

*The House At The Edge Of The Night by Catherine Banner (£5, Windmill) is out now*

#### **61. DODIE SMITH (1896-1990)**

The world can probably be divided into people who read Smith at an impressionable age and those who didn't. A real Smithite develops a faraway look in their eye if you mention *I Capture The Castle* (1948) – pining for a bohemian childhood of genteel poverty, tea room escapades and romance. Similarly, *The Hundred And One Dalmatians* (1956) has them muttering about buttered toast and London townhouses filled with puppies. The best thing to do in these instances is to not put up a fight but locate the books and join them.

#### **60. SARAH WATERS (BORN 1966) BY FRANCESCA MAIN, PUBLISHER, ORION**



"Sarah Waters – [author of *Tipping The Velvet* (1998), *Affinity* (1999), *Fingersmith* (2002), *The Night Watch* (2006)] – is one of the writers whose new novels I look forward to most fervently and who reminds me why I love to read. She's that rare combination of a great writer and a great storyteller, with sentences to savour and plots that keep you up at night. Her richly atmospheric fiction brings the past to life but always has something to say about how we live in the modern world, too."

#### **59. LYDIA DAVIS (BORN 1947) BY ANNE MEADOWS, COMMISSIONING EDITOR AT GRANTA AND PORTOBELLO BOOKS**

"Lydia Davis is an American writer known for her very short short-stories; stories as brief as this paragraph. The essence of her work is precision. The effect is sometimes melancholy or tender, sometimes gently, wonderfully funny. It is always absolutely her. Davis has been called a writer's writer's writer, but really this just means that the writers and readers who love her are devoted: every Lydia Davis fan has a favourite b-side. Mine is one of her longer stories, *Break It Down* (1986), which comes from the collection of the same name and charts, precisely, the economic and emotional cost of a love affair. It's a perfect story, magical in its economies, heartbreaking – it will change the way you think about fiction."

#### **58. JK ROWLING (BORN 1965)**

Thanks to the generations who grew up with Harry Potter publishing is booming (see the 'grit lit' explosion) and YA is now taken seriously as a genre. Alongside Potter, Rowling has written the much-underrated *The Casual Vacancy* in 2013, the Cormoran Strike thrillers as Robert Galbraith and taken *Harry Potter And The Cursed Child* to the stage. Plus, we can all curl up with the best book of all: *Harry Potter And The Prisoner Of Azkaban* (1999) any time we want.

#### **YOU MAY ALSO LIKE**

**Best young adult books: the YA novels you will love as an adult, including Noughts & Crosses**

JK Rowling at the UK premiere of *Fantastic Beasts*, 2018

#### **57. ANNE TYLER (BORN 1941) BY AUTHOR LAURA BARNETT**

"The novels of Anne Tyler – 79 years old; author of 23 books, and long-time resident of Baltimore – where the majority of her works are set – should be passed from mother to daughter. That's what happened to me, anyway: I was 13 when my mum, from whom I've always taken many of my reading cues, handed me a copy of Tyler's novella *A Slipping-Down Life* (1970). I was immediately gripped and have remained so by Tyler's writing ever since.

I know of no other novelist better able to convey, on the page, the texture and feel of everyday life, as it is lived, from moment to moment, with all its structural underpinnings of memory and experience and love. She has a wicked sense of humour too and a canny eye for the bizarre. Start with *Breathing Lessons* (1988) – my favourite of her novels – about a long-married couple on their way to a friend's funeral; move on to the extraordinarily involving family drama of *Dinner At The Homesick Restaurant* (1982); and then dip in and out of her other books at will. All human life is there, in its glorious beauty and banality. You will not be disappointed."

*Greatest Hits by Laura Barnett is out now (£7.99, W&N)*

**56. JUDY BLUME (BORN 1938)**

Since the 70s, generations of teens (and tweens) have been saved from adolescent confusion by Blume. From *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* (1970) to *Blubber* (1974) and *Forever* (1975), she's tackled all the topics adults said were off limits: sex, menstruation, body-hating, love, friendship... Reading her 1986 collection of letters from fans in *Letters To Judy*, she may have saved some lives too.

**55. PAT BARKER (BORN 1943)**

AKA the reinventor. Starting out, Barker tackled the working class lives of northern women in *Union Street* (1982) then turned her attention to the epic and iconic Regeneration trilogy in the early 90s which brought home the horror, loss and sheer futility of the first world war, melding fact and fiction with its depiction of war poets Sassoon, Owen and Graves at a hospital for traumatised soldiers. More recently, she has given voices to the women of the Trojan war in the majestic *The Silence Of The Girls*. Read and adore...

**54. JOAN AIKEN (1924-2004) BY NIKKI BARROW, FOUNDER OF MANDER BARROW PR**

"Shivers and frissons run through me at the mention of *The Wolves Of Willoughby Chase* (1962), *Black Hearts In Battersea* (1964) and *Nightbirds On Nantucket* (1966), just a few of the genius books by Joan Aiken. I can still picture the editions I pored over. Hers was a bonkers imagination I adored, that held me in its thrall and took me on one hell of a great ride. Hours were happily lost in a cacophony of wonderful ingredients where valiant children take on impossible odds, ghastly creatures, evil circumstances. Fearsome, fantastic and feisty, this is where I say THANK YOU, because my passion for the written word and appetite for genius wordsmiths began here."

**53. ANDREA LEVY (1956-2019)**

Levy's parents arrived in Britain from Jamaica in 1948 (her father arriving on the Windrush). More interested in art, at the age of 23, Levy discovered a love of books via Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* and from there the wonders of Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou and Alice Walker. Unable to find fiction that reflected the black experience in Britain, she started to write about her own life – from the semi-autobiographical *Every Light In The House Burnin'* (1994) to the rich, transporting post-WW2 novel *Small Island* (2004), which is one of those books you disappear into only to finish blinking in the light and bereft that it has ended.

**52. OCTAVIA E BUTLER (1947-2006)**

A young African-American writer from 1976 finds herself transported back in time to the deep south of 1817. Once there, she must protect a slave owner in order to ensure that he becomes her own ancestor; her very life depends on him. Butler's unflinching 1979 bestselling book, *Kindred*, deftly took the tropes of sci-fi and used them to reflect the African-American experience, slavery and violence in the most political and shocking of ways. And, thanks to other works including the five-volume Patternist series, Butler remains one of the world's greatest writers.

**51. JACQUELINE WILSON (BORN 1945) BY AUTHOR NINA STIBBE**

"Even if it's too late for most of us to read Jacqueline Wilson as a child, I'd like to celebrate and thank her. Firstly, because her stories are wondrous and her characters are charming, familiar and flawed. But also because since reading them with my children, I haven't been able to stop imagining what a difference it would have made to me (and thousands of others) had she been around when I was a child.

Books for children and young teens, before Jacqueline Wilson, featured, on the whole, families whose lovely lives have been interrupted by circumstances beyond their control – like war or extraordinary unfairness – the parents often having been wrongly accused, or taken ill, or tragically deceased and the family left poor but plucky and, often, by the end we'd see order restored and life go back to good old normal. These books were perfectly satisfying to me at the time and I devoured them with glee.

The fact that these books didn't reflect my family didn't occur to me. I didn't wonder where the divorces were, or the depressed, drunken mothers or the sadness and worry that I knew all about. And I don't suppose other kids wondered where the unemployment was, or homelessness, or poverty, or abandonment, or the kids in care, the mentally ill, the warring couples, the fat kids, the bullied, the disabled, the anxious girls and boys. We didn't wonder because we didn't expect to see ourselves. Our storybooks – for all their escapism and loveliness – also reinforced the idea that our flawed and troubled families weren't normal, nice or worthy. Jacqueline Wilson changed all that. Real family life features in her books – warts 'n' all. It's all there and it's all OK."

*Reasons To Be Cheerful by Nina Stibbe is out now (£9, Viking)*

**50. CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE (BORN 1977)**

A heartbreaking exploration of the Nigerian Civil War in *Half Of A Yellow Sun* (2007), a family torn apart by cruelty in *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), hilariously expounding on the race implications of hair relaxers in *Americanah* (2013), a rabble-rousing TED talk and book on why we should all be feminists... To read her books is a joyous ride of language and human emotion set against social, racial, religious and political backdrops. There might actually be nothing that Adichie can't do.



Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie speaks on stage during the annual Make Equality Reality Gala, 2019

#### 49. RUTH PRAWER JHABVALA (1927-2013)

A self-described refugee who lived across three continents (her Jewish family fled Germany in 1939 and she later adopted both Delhi and New York as home), Prawer Jhabvala is an extraordinary talent everyone should try. A prolific screenwriter and author (she won Academy awards for both 1985's *A Room With A View* and 1992's *Howard's End*, while her 1975 novel *Heat And Dust* won the Booker Prize – making her the only person to have won both accolades), her novels move from inside India to satirising those in search of it.

#### 48. MALORIE BLACKMAN (BORN 1962)

"My overall aim is to get more children reading. It's as simple as that." With over 60 books to her name, Blackman has become part of Britain's reading fabric but despite writing for a young audience, the reality of the world is never far from her characters' lives (the seminal *Noughts & Crosses* series was inspired by the 1993 murder of black teenager, Stephen Lawrence). Not one to underestimate young minds or hold back from confronting the truth never have we needed her more.

#### 47. SHIRLEY HAZZARD (1931-2016) BY AUTHOR ELIZABETH MCKENZIE

"From the time she was a child, Shirley Hazzard read widely, spending her allowance on poetry books that she committed to memory. From this deep literary immersion, Hazzard has produced her own body of incomparable work. In her stories, novels and non-fiction, we find her independent voice, her fierce intellect, her diamond-like sentences – irreducible, multi-faceted, brilliant. Works such as *The Transit Of Venus* (1980) remind us that literature is grand and – for civilisation – essential."

*The Portable Veblen by Elizabeth McKenzie (£8.99, Fourth Estate) is out now*

#### 46. NADINE GORDIMER (1923-2014)

Three of Gordimer's books were banned during South Africa's apartheid regime. Angry, honest, challenging, uncompromising, she was a writer that believed literature should reflect the truth of society. Even after the free elections of 1994, Gordimer remained deeply political and once stated "We were naive, because we focused on removing the apartheid government and never thought deeply enough about what would follow." Disturbingly, all of her novels – including 1974's uncomfortable *The Conservationist* – remain relevant.

#### 45. ELIZABETH TAYLOR (1912-1975) BY ALEXANDRA PRINGLE, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, BLOOMSBURY

"Elizabeth Taylor is one of the most underrated, unsung but utterly wonderful novelists Britain has ever produced. She was described by Philip Hensher as 'best known for not being better known' and 'one of the hidden treasures of the English novel'; David Baddiel said 'she's the missing link between Jane Austen and John Updike' and Anne Tyler proclaims 'Jane Austen, Elizabeth Taylor, Barbara Pym, Elizabeth Bowen – soul-sisters all'. Of course it doesn't help that she shared her name with a film star.

My Elizabeth Taylor wrote 12 novels and there is something for every part of your life in them. Many say *Mrs Palfrey At The Claremont* (1971, about an old lady in a South Kensington hotel) is her masterpiece. But I most especially love *In A Summer Season* (1961, a perfect novel of family life) and *A Game Of Hide And Seek* (1951),



the greatest ever novel about nearly having an affair but not having one – better than *Brief Encounter*. But whichever novel you like most, each is to be read and savoured. Each is acutely observed, exquisitely written, subtle, wry, touching – and true.”

#### 44. FANNIE FLAGG (BORN 1944) BY AUTHOR HOLLIE OVERTON

“Growing up in Texas, a bookish ginger, my obsession with reading and theatre made me different from the football-crazed kids in my hometown. Fortunately, I discovered Fannie Flagg; devouring *Fried Green Tomatoes At The Whistle Stop Cafe* (1987) and *Daisy Fay And The Miracle Man* (1981). Fannie's books deal with serious issues: divorce, domestic violence, jealousy and power dynamics between women and the men they love. Coping with similar issues, I felt a profound connection to Daisy Fay, Ruth, Idgie, Evelyn and Ninny; all outsiders in their own right. I loved how outlandish they were, making spectacular mistakes but never losing their sense of humour. Even when I struggled to find my way, I always returned to Fannie's world. I'll never forget the lessons I learned from her. Life may be filled with tragedy, but it's how you cope that defines you.”

*The Walls by Hollie Overton (£6, Arrow) is out now*

#### 43. PATRICIA HIGHSMITH (1921-1995) BY KA BRADLEY, COMMISSIONING EDITOR, GRANTA AND PORTOBELLO BOOKS

“Patricia Highsmith, of Ripley (*The Talented Mr Ripley*, 1955), Carol (*The Price Of Salt*, 1952) and *Strangers On A Train* (1950) fame, wrote ‘thrillers’ and was a master of ‘suspense’, which is an almost antiseptic, curiously polite way of describing the hypnotic sway she holds over her readers over the course of a novel. Her writing is clean, exact, polished to a hard glint; she combines an acute emotional perceptiveness with a disturbing readiness to torture her characters and, by extension, her audience. She's quite often described as wickedly funny and that sums it up perfectly – she had wickedness and cruelty down to an art form and knew how to bring out the humour and tenderness inherent in them.”

#### 42. SUE TOWNSEND (1946-2014)

One of the funniest writers to grace the planet, Townsend's Adrian Mole series caught human foibles and British society with deceptively piercing observations “I was racked with sexuality but it wore off when I helped my father put manure on our rose bed” while *The Queen & I* (1992) was both a prescient and delicious satire of the Windsors. However, her humour was rooted in reality and her 1989 essay on how the welfare state left her and her children scrabbling pavements in the search for dropped money remains one of the most powerful pieces of political writing you could ever come across.

#### 41. JOAN DIDION (BORN 1934) BY STYLIST CONTRIBUTOR, ANNA FIELDING

“Who wouldn't want to be Joan in her most famous photograph, looking out of a Corvette with a cigarette in hand? There's the famous packing list for last minute travel, including amongst other things, two skirts, two leotards, a bottle of bourbon and her prescription medication. In 2015, the fashion house Celine made 80-year-old Didion their campaign star.

But this is all surface. At the risk of sounding like an elitist hipster, I was introduced to Joan Didion before this mania, by a university lecturer in the late 90s. It's a love affair that's become deeper with time: starting with the easy-to-grab phrases (“we tell ourselves stories in order to live”, “writers are always selling somebody out”) and moving into an awestruck respect at her mastery of our shared language.

I do not wish to think of Celine. When I think of Didion I think the mental states she references: sinister hysteria in the desert, bleakness in Hawaii, shared isolation in Malibu. I think of the strange and remote Charlotte Douglas in 1977's *A Book Of Common Prayer*, field-stripping her cigarettes in a turbulent, fictional Central American country. I think of Maria, from Didion's 1970 novel *Play As It Lays*, driving half-mad through the endless Californian freeways. I think of strength, vulnerability and control.”

Author Joan Didion in her Upper East Side apartment

#### **40. ANITA BROOKNER (1928-2016) BY JULIET ANNAN, PUBLISHING DIRECTOR, FIG TREE**

"Anita Brookner wrote about women facing questions of morality, alienation and loneliness but she did so with such clarity, intelligence, humanity and wit that I could happily read all of her 24 novels on a permanent loop. Those were all unpopular subjects in the late 20th century – like sex to the Victorians, death was taboo back then (death memoirs are so much more popular now) and I always felt the last novels she wrote were her most shocking – for they were not just about fear of loneliness but about fear of being alone at the moment of death.

Am I putting you off? Don't be – she is very, very funny too. Her favourite novel was *Latecomers* (1988): start with that."

#### **39. JEAN RHYS (1890-1979) BY CHRIS WHITE, EDITORIAL DIRECTOR, SCRIBNER**

"Stories of lives lived on the fringes of society were central to all Rhys's writing. Perhaps deservedly, her most celebrated work is *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), that brief and powerful prequel to *Jane Eyre*. It was through *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), though, that I first discovered Rhys. The themes of dominance and dependency (not least of the alcoholic kind) permeate the book, while its vivid descriptions of 1930s Parisian café culture provide the perfect backdrop to this dark, wise and bracing account of a woman on the cusp of middle age, recklessly battling the twin demons of drink and depression. Like an ice cold martini, Rhys's writing provides no easy comfort but shakes the reader out of their complacency and offers, if only briefly, a feeling of illumination: 'Everything tender and melancholy – as life is sometimes, just for one moment.'"

#### **38. BERYL BAINBRIDGE (1932-2010) BY AUTHOR (AND HUGE BERYL BAINBRIDGE FAN) JILL DAWSON**

"There is no one like Beryl Bainbridge. Hard-drinking and smoking, darkly humorous, in her novels she relished the absurd, the inexplicable, the candid and the violent. I love everything about her writing: the salty prose; the rationed cruelty towards characters; the wicked observation; the frugal way with adjectives, adverbs and sub-clauses; the deadpan tone; the punch. And for once it's not about the chattering classes! It's hard to pick a favourite but if you haven't read her start with *A Quiet Life* (1976), her autobiographical tale of a brother and sister (young Beryl) trapped in a bleak but dangerous home. A beautifully spare novel which is fresh and funny and yet still manages to break your heart."

*The Language Of Birds* by Jill Dawson (£12, Sceptre) is out now

#### **37. SYLVIA PLATH (1932-1963)**

"What I've done is to throw together events from my own life, fictionalising to add colour – it's a potboiler really, but I think it will show how isolated a person feels when he is suffering a breakdown... I've tried to picture my world and the people in it as seen through the distorting lens of a bell jar."

The life and death of Sylvia Plath has been hashed and rehashed in the half-century since she died. Her poetic legacy is indisputable and at the centre of its longevity is *The Bell Jar* (1963). Its brutal and recognisable representation of sexual confusion and spiralling depression resonates across genders and generations while maintaining its legend as a feminist landmark.

Sylvia Plath: "Let me live, love, and say it well in good sentences"

### 36. ANGELA CARTER (1940-1992)

To read *Nights At The Circus* (1984) is to lose yourself in a world of the incredible, featuring everything from swan-women to imperial St Petersburg: Carter is one of the most imaginative and fiercely feminist writers to ever tell a story. And what stories she does tell – from rewriting Grimm fairytales in *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) to the jaw-dropping *The Infernal Desire Machines Of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) – oh, what wonder awaits the unwitting reader.

### 35. ELAINE DUNDY (1921-2008)

Boy did Dundy pick 'em. Escaping from a violent family home, her marriage to the critic Kenneth Tynan was a whirlwind of disaster caused by his penchant for sado-masochism and suicide threats and her subsequent spiral of drink and depression (happily, after the marriage was dissolved in 1962, she got herself back on track after a decade). However, in an effort to impress, the marriage did cause Dundy to write *The Dud Avocado* (1958) based on a year she spent in Paris. Comical and complicated, it's a gloriously funny romp that made Groucho Marx "laugh, scream and guffaw".

### 34. AMY TAN (BORN 1952)

If ever there was an author to prove the adage 'write what you know', it's Amy Tan. After being criticised as 'inauthentic', Tan turned to her mother for an insight into her own life as an American child of Chinese-immigrant parents (Tan's mother escaped from an abusive marriage in China, not seeing her three children from the union for 30 years). These conversations formed the basis of the immensely readable 1989 bestseller, *The Joy Luck Club*, which is told in 16 parts via four mother-and-daughter perspectives. These roots have continued to inspire the incredible Tan (see her TED talk and role as a dominatrix singer in the world's most famous literary garage band) – both *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001) and *The Valley Of Amazement* (2013) have foundations in her grandmother's life as a courtesan and subsequent suicide by opium.

### 33. CLARICE LISPECTOR (1920-1977)

The iconic Brazilian author Lispector (whose family fled the Ukraine's anti-Jewish pogroms in 1921) is not for the timid. Abstract and ambitious, worried, despairing, hopeful and savage, she's regularly cited in the same breath as Franz Kafka and Virginia Woolf (a novelist she only picked up after being likened to her in reviews). Dip your toe into the recently republished and translated *Complete Stories* (2015) before revelling in her final astounding novella, *The Hour Of The Star* (1977), which leads the reader along constantly shifting ground.

### 32. LESLIE MARMON SILKO (BORN 1948)

Growing up on the Laguna Pueblo reservation in New Mexico, Silko reveals she learned the stories and history of the Laguna people from her grandmother and other female relatives. It's a history that has influenced her own poetry and novels including 1977's seminal *Ceremony* – a book that started off as a comedy about a mother trying to keep her son on the wagon and turned into a powerfully moving story of looking to your roots to find healing in the future.

### 31. RUTH RENDELL (1930-2015)

There's Ruth Rendell nailing the cosy crime market thanks to her Inspector Wexford novels (she did not take kindly to being called the 'queen of crime', dismissing it as 'patronising') then in the 80s all of a sudden she invents Barbara Vine. Gone are the mysteries of middle England and out come dark, twisted tales of psychopaths and killers in inner-city Britain. Whichever pen name you choose is to read a crime novel written with total precision and pride.

### 30. URSULA LE GUIN (1929-2018) BY AUTHOR JO BAKER

"I first encountered Ursula Le Guin's work as a child, when I picked up *The Tombs Of Atuan* (1971) in the local library and fell straight into a dark and morally complex story that still haunts the edges of my imagination today. I love her work for its grand scale – the conjuring of worlds and universes and religions – but I also love it for her beautifully turned sentences. I come away from a Le Guin novel feeling like I have been in the very best company: challenged, beguiled, unsettled and that I'm seeing the world a little differently for the experience." *The Body Lies by Jo Baker is out now (£12.99, Doubleday)*

### 29. IRIS MURDOCH (1919-1999) BY AUTHOR MEGAN BRADBURY



"When I read Iris Murdoch's novels I am reminded of adolescence, which brought with it such a colourful array of physical and psychological states – desires, fantasies, feelings of love, guilt, shame, ugliness, inadequacy. Murdoch's characters exist in this state, guided generally by their desires and restricted for the most part only by the social institutions they come into contact with – marriage, work, children, social reputation.

The joy of Murdoch's novels comes from watching her characters struggle to navigate the fine line between desire and social conformity, between selfish and selfless love. In Murdoch's novels, as in real life, once the passion storm has cleared, individuals are forced to untangle the sometimes violent and often-humorous messes they have created. As such, Murdoch describes tenderly and without judgment how it is human beings can at one and the same time be both heroic and weak, pathetic and strong."

*Everyone Is Watching by Megan Bradbury is out now (£7.99, Picador)*

## 28. ANITA DESAI (BORN 1937)

"When I started publishing, it was clear that my work was not considered to be very important literature. What men wrote was far more important; their voices were louder, they were heard more and what I wrote was often belittled by both readers and critics." If one attribute can sum up the Mussoorie-born Desai, it's an unerring ability to tell the truth about any situation. With 16 novels (her most recent book 2011's *The Artist Of Disappearance* is three novellas bound together), Desai presents India and the people who live there with truth and honesty.



Indian novelist Anita Desai: "I aim to tell the truth about any subject, not a romance or fantasy, not avoid the truth"

## 27. ANNE ENRIGHT (BORN 1962) BY AUTHOR LOUISE DOUGHTY

"Anne Enright is one of those authors that defies categorisation. Her books range from short story collections and non-fiction through to the most brilliant, iridescent novels: read the first page of any of her works and you know instantly, you're in an Enright book.

For newcomers to her work, I'd recommend *The Forgotten Waltz* (2011) about a young married woman who has an affair with a married man and reaps the consequence. It's the most accessible of her books but full of her characteristic coruscating prose. Her Booker prizewinner *The Gathering* (2007) is about a brother and sister relationship. *The Green Road* (2015) about four children returning for Christmas with their difficult mother is also a metaphor for Ireland and the way we are all tied to the land where we grew up, whether we like it or not. She's a true original and an unmissable writer."

*Platform Seven by Louise Doughty is out now (£12.99, Faber)*

## 26. ROSAMOND LEHMANN (1901-1990) BY AUTHOR JONATHAN COE

"Discovering Rosamond Lehmann in my early 20s was a true revelation for me. I read her first novel *Dusty Answer* (1927) on the recommendation of a friend and it's still one of my favourite coming-of-age novels. Until then I had mainly read male writers and Rosamond Lehmann suddenly gave me the feeling of being taken on a private, incredibly truthful tour of the female consciousness. Some people find her books too romantic, inward-looking and claustrophobic. But in my highly personal pantheon, she is one of the great 20th century writers."

*Middle England by Jonathan Coe is out now (£7, Penguin)*

## 25. BARBARA PYM (1913-1980) BY MELISSA COX, EDITORIAL DIRECTOR, HODDER & STOUGHTON

"Philip Larkin called Barbara Pym 'the most underrated writer of the 20th century' though Pym herself took a slightly more cautious view of her own literary capabilities, stating in her diary: 'Read some of Jane Austen's last chapters and find out how she manages all the loose ends.' Personally, I agree with Larkin; her books are wonderful, warm, witty observations of human folly, of single women, of married women, of lives lived quietly. She is the novelist I turn to in sickness for comfort and in health for laughter. If you've never read her then please, take my copy of *Excellent Women* (1952). Thank me later."

## 24. EDNA O'BRIEN (BORN 1930)

*"The most gifted woman now writing in English" – Philip Roth*

From her breakout debut – 1960's *The Country Girls* – which was banned in Ireland for its honest representation of sex to 2015's *The Little Red Chairs* about a fugitive war criminal in rural Ireland (that's just the starting point), O'Brien is a writer who is unafraid of the ambitious or the new, grappling them into place with her incisive voice. And then there's her collection of stories – *The Love Object* (1968) – which reflects on her life thus far... Pick one, lose yourself utterly.

## 23. DORIS LESSING (1919-2013)

When the author Jenny Diski was 15 she was expelled from school and placed in what she termed a 'loony bin'. Out of the blue came a letter from a school friend's mother, who was also an author, inviting her to live with them: "If you think the life of a writer is exciting, you'll be disappointed," Doris Lessing wrote. "I live a very boring life. When I'm writing, nothing else happens here. It won't be much fun, but at least you'll have your own room and perhaps a chance to go back to school."

Lessing did indeed provide Diski with shelter and inspiration but to contradict her, everything happened when she wrote. Subversion, science fiction, feminism, tragedy, socialism (Lessing was tapped by MI5 for two decades)... While 1962's *The Golden Notebook* is held up as a feminist masterpiece (and it is) – the prolific, ambitious and ornery author created a library of brilliant works.

## 22. BELL HOOKS (BORN 1952)

Born Gloria Jean Watkins, writer bell hooks took her writing name from her maternal grandmother and adopted lower case letters to call attention to that matriarchal legacy. An author, professor and activist, hooks' work has influenced intersectional feminism (her 1981 book *Ain't I A Woman?* is a rite-of-passage read), queer theory, popular culture and beyond. Her 2000 book *Feminism Is For Everybody* states: "Again and again men tell me they have no idea what it is feminists want... It is for these men, young and old, and for all of us, that I have written this short handbook, the book I have spent more than 20 years longing for. I had to write it because I kept waiting for it to appear, and it did not."

## 21. ROXANE GAY (BORN 1974)

In the 2018 collection of essays, *Not That Bad: Dispatches From Rape Culture*, Gay writes in the introduction: "What is it like to live in a culture where it often seems like it is a question of when, not if, a woman will encounter some kind of sexual violence?" Given that we have not one but two presidential candidates mired in accusations of sexual assault, Gay's unflinching voice (which calls out everything from sexual violence to attitudes towards obesity and ingrained self-hatred) has never been so necessary. From her podcast to her essay collection *Bad Feminist* (2014), short story collection *Ayiti* (2011), the novel *An Untamed State* (2014), the short story collection *Difficult Women* (2017) and the memoir *Hunger* (2017), Gay is unmissable.

Roxane Gay photographed for Stylist, 2019

## GREATEST FEMALE AUTHORS EVER: THE GAME-CHANGERS

### 20. NINA STIBBE (BORN 1962)

There's an unhelpful idea that in order to be A Great Novelist you must write about teeth-gnashing realism but actually a comic writer who can also pierce life's hardest moments is a truly wonderful thing. *Love, Nina* (2013) was Stibbe's breakout title but its fictional follow-up *Man At The Helm* (2014) is a masterwork – a book that induces proper laughter while tackling depression, dependency, family love and hope; read this and its two follow-up titles (*Paradise Lodge* and *Reasons To Be Cheerful*) if you're in the mood for some very British brilliance.

### 19. SARAH MOSS (BORN 1975)

Creator of one of this decade's most adored books: *Ghost Wall* (2018 – read it if you haven't), Moss is a writer of deft power conjuring up tales of place, past, present and future that tackle everything from Brexit to parenthood. With seven novels to her name (*Summerwater* is due out in August 2020), her remarkable tales are essential reading. (She is also very funny giving this response to the question 'which book do you think it the most overrated': "The one where the middle-aged white male literature/history professor at an American liberal arts college has a midlife crisis and sleeps with a blonde student whom he despises so it's all her fault when he loses his job and his wife, whom he despises, and has to move in with his mother, whom he despises.")

### 18. AMINATTA FORNA (BORN 1964)

Born in Glasgow, Forna's partial upbringing and family roots in Sierra Leone have informed both the novels *Ancestor Stones* (2006) and *The Memory Of Love* (2010) as well as her tragic and compelling 2002 memoir, *The Devil That Danced On The Water*. *The Hired Man* (2013), is set in Croatia but also explores the author's lyrical exploration of what humans do to each other in the name of war while *Happiness* (2018) seamlessly weaves together nature and humans, homes and rootlessness...

### 17. MEGAN ABBOTT (BORN 1971) BY ANGUS CARHILL, SENIOR EDITOR AT FABER & FABER

"I first read Megan Abbott sometime in 2008. *Queenpin* (2007) was a short, sharp period piece set in Vegas that genuinely stood shoulder to shoulder with the noir greats, only with one big difference: its two leads were women. And in Abbott's hands it all made sense, the narrator and her heroine and mentor, Gloria Denton, were characters to die for.

Fast forward a few years, and she had moved away from historical settings to a series of contemporary novels, about girls this time, high school girls and their complicated friendships and enmities. *Dare Me* (2012) explored the dangerous clique of a cheerleader squad while *The Fever* (2014) read like an inspired modern take on Carrie crossed with *Friday Night Lights* (about as high praise as I could give anything!)."

### 16. CELESTE NG (BORN 1980)

Ng has two books to her name: *Everything I Never Told You* (2014) and *Little Fires Everywhere* (2017) and most of us would probably hock our mothers to write even one of them. Exploring the parts of society that are kept hidden – the truths we rarely admit to and the pasts we'd rather not talk about – Ng is able to marry readable, addictive plots with universal truths in a way that makes her one of the most brilliant writers working today.

Little Fires Everywhere author Celeste Ng

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#### 15. YAA GYASI (BORN 1989)

Ghanaian-American Gyasi may have written just the one book to date but *Homegoing* (2016) isn't just any debut. The tale of two half-sisters (Effia marries a British governor, Esi is held captive in the cells of Cape Coast Castle), each chapter follows their descendants' fates as one line experiences slavery in the American South, Harlem and present-day racism in America while the other line navigates the familial relations and colonisation of Ghana. What makes *Homegoing* so powerful is how it simply draws a line between the horrors of the past and the politics of the present.

#### 14. EIMEAR MCBRIDE (BORN 1976)

Brave and pioneering, McBride's *A Girl Is A Half-Formed Thing* (2013) and 2016's *The Lesser Bohemians* are almost raw to the touch while 2020's *Strange Hotel* leaves you confounded and thrilled. Exploring everything from brutality, abandonment, family abuse and self-abasement to love, tenderness, humour and joy, McBride somehow has found a way to translate our inner selves onto the page through her unique use of language but also an understanding of literature's most innovative voices.

#### 13. SALLY ROONEY (BORN 1991)

The youngest writer on this list, Rooney's *Normal People* (2018) has become a sensation that captured a generation. Her tale of Marianne and Connell resonates with anyone who's ever been in love, a gauche teenager, a lost soul, broken and found a way to mend (maybe)... Written in a deceptively simple prose (which is actually incredibly hard to pull off), once you pick it up, you'll be lost for hours. Her 2017 debut, *Conversations With Friends*, is more divisive but actually if you love horrible people doing rotten things to each other, it's a brilliant read.

#### 12. SARAH HALL (BORN 1974) BY AMY ADAMS, PRODUCTION EDITOR, STYLIST

"Being from the Lake District, I might be a little biased when it comes to favouring fellow Cumbrian Sarah Hall – but her novels do far more than whisk you up north (though for this read *Haweswater* (2002) or her brilliant *The Wolf Border* (2015)). From the dystopian, Margaret Atwood-esque *The Carhullan Army* (2007) to the Booker-shortlisted story of a Coney Island tattoo artist, *The Electric Michelangelo* (2004), her original, evocative writing deserves a place on every bookshelf."

#### 11. JESMYN WARD (BORN 1977)

From the horror of Hurricane Katrina in *Salvage The Bones* (2011), the enduring legacy of slavery in 2017's *Sing Unburied Sing* to her non-fiction book about the deaths of her brother and four other young men in her hometown, *Men We Reaped* (2013), Ward's work unflinchingly explores the truth about race and America. When asked by the TLS about which writers are regularly underrated she replied: "Name most women writers. Name most writers of colour or queer writers or writers from marginalised communities, and you have multiple answers to pick from. I think there's a common misconception that such writers don't write universal stories. I, of course, think that is bullshit."

#### 10. ANGIE THOMAS (BORN 1988)

In 2018, Angie Thomas' *The Hate U Give* became one of the year's most powerful and talked about books. Inspired by #BlackLivesMatter and America's systemic racism, Thomas tells the tale of Starr caught between her white middle class school and her black neighbourhood – two worlds that crash and collide when her friend Khalil is killed in front of her in a police shooting. It also managed to build a world of characters you care about written with warmth and wit. Her follow-up, *On The Come Up* (2019), is just as captivating.

#### 9. CURTIS SITTEFELD (BORN 1975)

To paraphrase that popular wit George W Bush, "you're either with us or you're against us". Curtis Sittenfeld is one of those authors who can split the room – evangelists on one side, cold-hearted buffoons on the other (we're not biased). However, if you enjoy wry, witty prose that's written with what looks like god-given talent, then any of Sittenfeld's novels are for you. *Prep* (2005), *The Man Of My Dreams* (2006), *American Wife* (2008, loosely based on the life story of Laura Bush, wife of aforementioned Dubya), and *Eligible* (2016, it's part of the Austen Project, reimagining *Pride And Prejudice* in modern-day Cincinnati and nails Austen's tone) all remind



you why reading is a pastime that not only defines but also enhances your life. Next up is *Rodham* – her take on how history would have unfolded if Hillary hadn't married Bill...

#### 8. TAYARI JONES (BORN 1970)

In 2019, Jones won the Women's Prize For Fiction for her devastating story, *An American Marriage* (2018), the tale of a black man, Roy, imprisoned after being wrongly identified as a rapist and his relationship with his wife, Celestial. With plaudits from Barack Obama and Oprah, it's relatable and emotional while turning an unerring eye on the systemic incarceration of black people in the States. Her third novel which has just been released in the UK, *Silver Sparrow*, is just as powerful exploring bigamy and the lives of two sisters.

#### 7. JENNIFER EGAN (BORN 1962) BY AUTHOR HANNAH KOHLER

"Jennifer Egan is an iconoclast. From *Black Box* – a series of dispatches from the New Yorker's Twitter account in 2012 about a spy living in Europe in the near future, to the genre-bending *The Keep* (2006), she's a writer who takes traditional forms of story, shakes them down and transforms them into something new. Her Pulitzer-winning *A Visit From The Goon Squad* (2010) is about time, its slipperiness and stickiness, how it drags and telescopes, how the weighty moments in a person's life evaporate into history, how time is anything but linear – and she brings this to life through form, making the prose pause and hurtle backwards and forwards, one section dispensing with prose altogether in favour of PowerPoint. It's experimental and trippy, but there's nothing impenetrable or pretentious about it. Egan's writing is beautiful and wise and I always look forward to what she'll write next, because it's always something new."

*The Outside Lands* by Hannah Kohler is out now (£6, Picador)

#### 6. BERNARDINE EVARISTO (BORN 1959) BY SAPPHIRE REES, CAMPAIGNS OFFICER, PENGUIN GENERAL

"Bernardine Evaristo's writing sheds light on aspects of British society which are underrepresented in literature, and her characters are truly diverse in terms of gender, race, age, sexuality, geography and class. From a 74-year-old, gay, Antiguan-born Hackney local in *Mr Loverman*, to the characters in her Booker Prize-winning novel *Girl, Woman, Other* who include a 93-year-old black farmer in Northumberland, a non-binary person in their 20s, and a black lesbian woman in an abusive relationship, Bernardine Evaristo seeks out the people in Britain we don't hear from enough and brings them to life on the page. As Maggie Gee wrote in *The Guardian*: 'If you don't yet know her work, you should – she says things about modern Britain that no one else does'."



Booker winner Bernardine Evaristo

### Greatest female authors ever: the powerhouses

#### 5. JANE AUSTEN (1775-1817)

Charlotte Brontë once gave Austen the biggest literary (and sisterhood) dis in history, describing her writing as "a carefully fenced, highly cultivated garden, with neat borders and delicate flowers". Reader, she's dead wrong. Sex, lust, economics, social barriers, fallen women, illegitimate offspring, blackmail... Austen turned her exquisite prose to them all – while effortlessly capturing the rhythm and flow of polite conversation. And then let's not forget her enduringly relevant characters: the necessary machinations of *Pride And Prejudice*'s

Mrs Bennet constrained by money and the patriarchy (1813) or Marianne's enduringly recognisable self-deception in *Sense And Sensibility* (1811).

#### **4. MARGARET ATWOOD (BORN 1939) BY JOCASTA HAMILTON, PUBLISHING DIRECTOR, PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE**

"I was 18 when I discovered Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). Transgressive and chilling, it's often called a feminist dystopian novel but Atwood has said that she was careful only to draw on things which that were already happening, which serves to make her storytelling more urgent and radical. The same is true of *Oryx And Crake* (2003), which explores our relationship with the planet through the haunting story of Snowman, a scientist who is the only survivor of an apocalypse. Provocative and playful, Atwood is a novelist who explores big ideas with a wonderfully dark and dry humour."

#### **3. MAYA ANGELOU (1928-2014)**

Not one to resist a thrown gauntlet, Angelou embarked on her seven-book autobiography after a friend said he thought it would be impossible to "write an autobiography as literature". So she did.

Spanning her childhood in 1930s Arkansas (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 1969) via Ghana and Malcolm X (*All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*, 1986) to her final book *Mom & Me & Mom* (2013), which explored her relationship with her mother, the books are epic and lasting. For proof, see the chapter in *Caged Bird* where Angelou is taken to the dentist by her grandmother to remove two rotten teeth. The white dentist who owes them money refuses to treat the little girl because she is black, humiliating her grandmother in the process. Suddenly, Angelou's grandmother grows 10 feet tall and runs the quaking dentist out of town. Never will a reader wish more that fiction was indeed fact.

#### **2. HILARY MANTEL (BORN 1952) BY AUTHOR MEG ROSSOFF**

"I came to Hilary Mantel late with *Beyond Black* (2005), the bleak tale of a tormented psychic resignedly sharing her existence with a nasty collection of ghosts. It's not a 'nice' book in any sense of the word; its uncompromising bleakness holds two fingers up to literary approbation. Nothing I read of hers subsequently was in any way familiar, ordinary or less than riveting. And then came Thomas Cromwell, exploding from the pages of *Wolf Hall* (2010) like a bomb, flattening me (and nearly every other reader I know) with the fiercest, most intelligent, most blazingly passionate reanimation of history imaginable. If Hilary Mantel was a man, I believe she would unanimously be considered the greatest fiction writer of our time. She has my vote regardless."

*The Great Godden by Meg Rosoff (£12.99, Bloomsbury) is out 9 July 2020*

#### **1. TONI MORRISON (BORN 1931-2019)**

"Bearing witness" is the term Morrison applies to all her work; that the artist must have a vocation to produce work that is unquestionably political, social and beautiful. It's a belief that's guided her well – putting aside her many honours including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988 for the novel *Beloved*, a Nobel Prize prize and the Presidential Medal of Freedom from her friend Barack Obama – Morrison's books shake you to the very core. They are brutal and unflinching in their exploration of race in America, juxtaposing poetical imagery with raw violence. *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Song Of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981) or *God Help The Child* (2015) – whichever Morrison book you read, each comes with its own gut-wrenching sorrow and life-affirming splendour.



Toni Morrison receives the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama, 2012

Images: UnSplash; Ryan Pfulger (Roxane Gay)

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## FRANCESCA BROWN

Francesca Brown is books editor for Stylist magazine and Stylist Loves; she also compiles the Style List on a weekly basis. She is a self-confessed HBO abuser and has a wide selection of grey sweatshirts. Honestly, you just can't have enough. @franabouttown

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